The
Progressive Review

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What William Bennett Won't Tell You About the War on Drugs

Not since the Vietnam War years, has an administration and the media so badly informed the public about a major issue. Misinformation, disinformation, hyperbole and cant are rampant in reporting and official statements about the so-called "war on drugs." So misguided and mismanaged has been this battle that it is become true, as one observed put it, that "The war on drugs is America's drug problem."

This, however, is not only a matter of money wasted, lives lost needlessly, and

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national priorities perversely distorted. As the Review has pointed out on several occasions, the war on drugs is also a war on democracy. With the public hysteria, created and skillfully managed by two Republican administrations cheered on by the media, Americans have increasingly tolerated and encouraged a frightening assault on their own Constitution and rights. In this sense, we have all become victims of the war on drugs.

Last May we published a prototype alternative approach to the drug problem. This month we offer a collection of facts and observations that may help the reader see the drug situation and the war on drugs in a more rational perspective.

The next drug crises

The target of the war on drugs keeps shifting. Under Nixon, efforts were aimed at the heroin trade. In the early years of the Reagan administration, the direction shifted to marijuana. So successful was the government at clamping the lid on pot, that it created a market for a new cheap street drug, a market that was eventually filled by crack.

Now we are told to worry about cocaine despite the fact that cocaine use, by the government's own figures, has been declining in most age groups since 1979. And once again, the drug dealers are responding with new products. For example, smokable methamphetamine is now showing up in significant quantities. This drug, known as *ice*, has the decided advantage of not having to be imported, since it is manufactured in illegal laboratories. The New York Times recently wrote, "Experts fear the use of the drug *** could grow to devastating proportions among many of the nation's addicts, especially if efforts are successful to halt the smuggling of cocaine from abroad." Ice is said to produce a much longer high than crack (up to 24 hours as opposed to ten minutes),

But although ice has begun to get some attention, it is far from being the only synthetic drug being developed and sold. Dr. Darryl Inaba of the Haight Ashbury Drug Clinic in San Francisco, told Walter Truett Anderson of Pacific News Service recently, "The sophistication of the street chemists has now reached the point at which they can produce any conventional drug or improve on it." Writes Anderson, "Name a drug produced from plants *** and somebody is working on a pure and powerful chemical synthetic to compete with it or replace it."

And, in a familiar pattern, Anderson notes, "Ice was helped along by earlier federal efforts to halt the manufacture of speed. The legislation cut off supplies of some chemicals, and led to the discovery of new -- and better -- ways to produce methamphetamines," using such readily available products as aluminum foil.

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Meanwhile, as efforts to control marijuana smuggling continue, pot smokers find they can enjoy the drug in relative safety by simply growing it in their homes or apartments, using -- of all things -- the sort of lighting developed to protect neighborhoods against urban crime. Once again drug technology has kept ahead of the government.

Further, the Washington Post reports that there has been a worldwide explosion in opium production, so much so that Southeast Asian heroin is being sold on the streets of major cities with purities of 48 to 51 percent, more than five times the normal potency. What do we do now; send troops back to Southeast Asia?

Maybe that won't be necessary. After all, there is always "China white," a synthetic form of heroin, reported to be 1000 times more powerful than morphine. China white has been around for some years but drug officials don't know how much is in use because it doesn't show up in the blood.

How many people will we have to lock up?

The administration and much of the public favor far more stringent action against users of drugs, including prison terms. But there are currently 8.2 million Americans who have used cocaine in the past year, according to official estimates. To lock all these people up for just one year would cost nearly $250 billion. In addition we would have to incarcerate approximately one out of every seven young adult in the country for marijuana use.

The crack 'menace'

Although crack is certainly a potent drug, government officials and the media have made it seem an inexorable, incurable terror reminsicent of previous hyperbolic campaigns against "reefer madness." In truth, little data is available on the effects of crack other than heart-wrenching anecdotal material. A few facts do, however, intrude on this picture.

o According to the government's own statistics, some 484,000 people used crack in 1988 at least once a month. On the other hand, 2.4 million people have tried it. Apparently, 80% of the people who used crack did not get hooked on this "terribly addictive" drug.

o Although death rates for crack are not differentiated from other cocaine death figures, one can assume they are very slight, given that cocaine death rates are far below those for alcohol, tobacco and heroin.

o A study by Dr. Charles Haertzen of the Addiction Research Center asked former addicts how difficult it was to quit various drugs they had tried. The ex-addicts gave heroin top billing for addictiveness, followed closely by cigarettes. Next was alcohol and finally cocaine..

About those 'drug-crazed killers'

Much has been made of the relationship between drugs and crime. But a distinction must be made between someone committing a crime because of his or her addiction and committing a crime either to buy drugs or to settle a drug trade dispute. While a high percent of arrested individuals use drugs, there is little data that the drugs themselves caused them to commit a specific crime. With one exception: alcohol. One study found that 40% of those committing serious crimes did so while under the influence of alcohol, one of our legal drugs.

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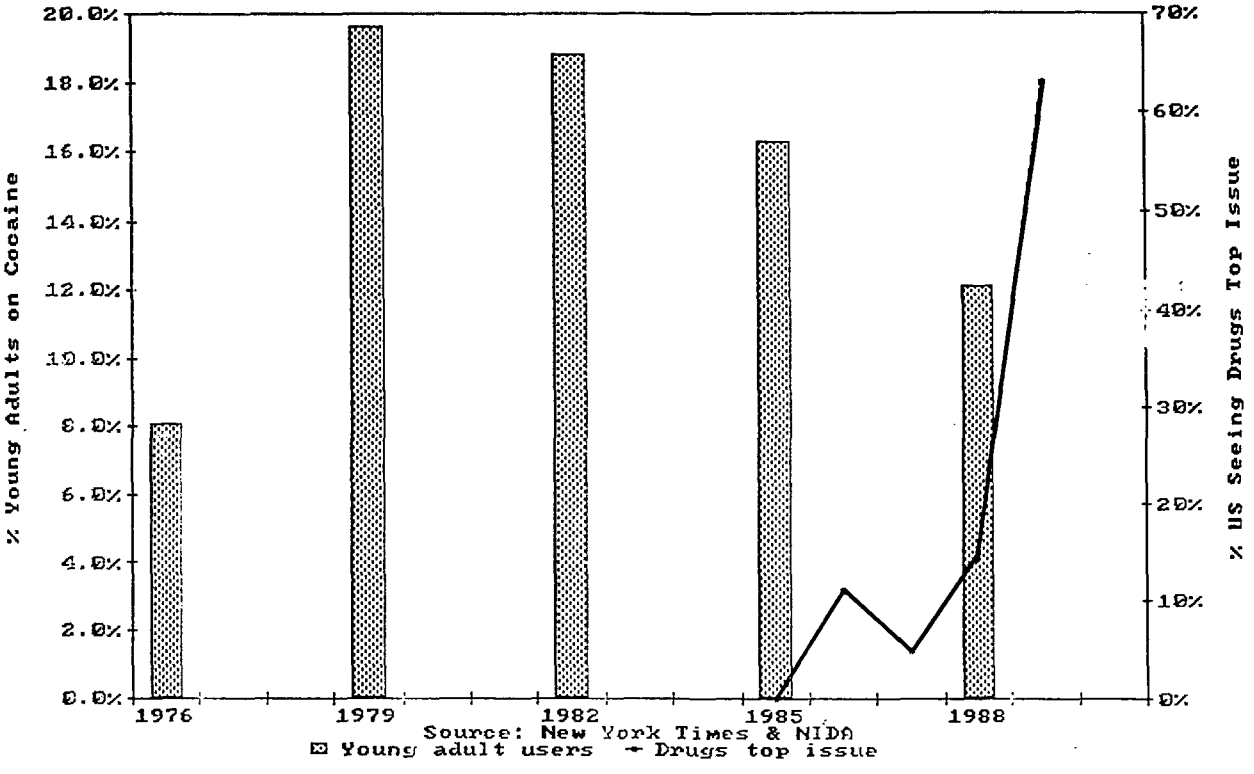
Drug Hype vs. Drug Use

Drugs as the Top Issue vs. Number of Drug Users



This chart illustrates the stunning conflict between the propaganda about drugs and the reality. The bars in the chart represent the percent of young adults using cocaine as estimated by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. (Incidentally, the pattern for other age groups and other drugs --including cigarettes and alcohol -- is similar in most cases). The rising line at the right represents the percent of respondents that named drugs as the country's top issue in a poll by the New York Times and CBS News. Note that drugs didn't even make the list until 1985, when Ronald Reagan breathed new life into his war on drugs by declaring drug dealers a greater national security threat than terrorists. By 1987 the drug issue had waned, but got new impetus with the start of the 1988 presidential campaign. The increase in 1988 all occurred in the months before the conventions. In January, for example, Reagan announced plans for random testing of government workers and later Congress approved a role for the military in anti-drug operations. The importance of drugs as an issue jumped ten points during this period, apparently largely due to the campaign and media attention to the issue.

Even more startling is the 40 point jump between July of this year, when just over 22% of poll respondents saw drugs as the top issue, and last month when 64% saw it as the top issue. The Times noted that this was "after weeks of sustained news coverage of the deepening crack epidemic and the turmoil caused by cocaine barons in Colombia and after the President's address to the nation last Tuesday when he outlined his proposed anti-drug policy." The Times gave no evidence for the implication that the crack situation had deteriorated over the summer nor was there any suggestion that American military and diplomatic moves might have something to do with the "turmoil" in Colombia. In any case, America was being whipped into a frenzy by politicians and the media over a problem that solid data suggests has been abating since 1979.

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Amazing But True Facts From the Front

From Rep. Pete Stark's second annual drug test for his colleages:

- Under a $2.9 million federal drug-fighting grant, members of the Texas National Guard will dress up as cactus plants along the Mexican border.

- The annual American market for illicit narcotics is approximately equivalent to the federal deficit, twice what US consumers pay for oil, and about half the value of all US currency in circulation.

- The US Coast Guard estimates that as little as 5 to 7 percent of heroin and cocaine targeted for the US is stopped at the borders through interdiction efforts.

- In 1988 the US Navy and Coast Guard's cooperative interdiction efforts, involving 2,347 ship days and a cost of over $40 million, resulted in 17 ships being seized and 80 smugglers arrested. In 1987 and 1988 combined, the Air Force spent more than $8 million to fly their AWACs planes on patrol for more than 9000 hours, resulting the capture of less than 25 smugglers. Over the past two years the US Customs Service has spent more than $25 million to manufacture and fly sophisticated radar balloons off the Mexican border. It has caught two marijuana smugglers as a result.

- Twenty-five percent of the nation's top chief prosecutors favor some form of decriminalization of marijuana.

- A 1988 special report for the Pentagon stated that "Increased drug interdiction efforts are not likely to greatly affect the availability of cocaine in the United States."

- The US Attorney in Miami recently declined to prosecute a drug-smuggling case in which the Customs Service had confiscated a half-ton of marijuana because the office is overworked and won't touch cases under a set 2.5 ton minimum.

What's a drug?

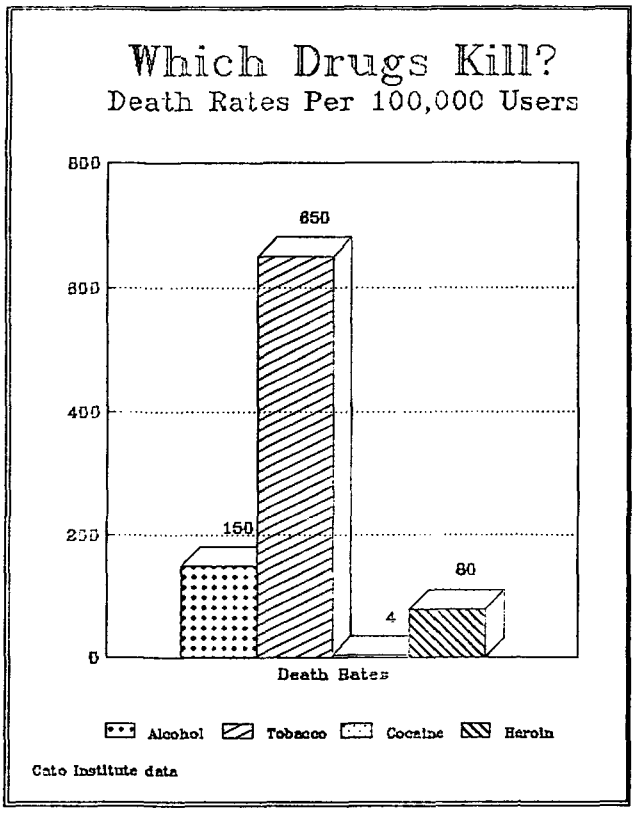
One of the assumptions behind the war on drugs is that it is socially intolerable to have Americans living their lives under the influence of mood-altering substances. Yet millions of Americans do so completely legally by consuming alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, tranquilizers, speed and other prescribed and over-the-counter drugs. Further, recent research has found that sugar operates on the brain in much the manner of a traditional drug, which may help to explain why conventional drug addicts often report a sugar craving during withdrawal. In short, we have not declared a war on *all* drugs, just certain drugs that for various reasons we find socially unacceptable.

Retreat from liberty

One of the most truly terrifying aspects of the war on drugs is what it is doing to the value Americans place on their own freedom. A New York Times-CBS poll asked the following question: *"Would you favor a policy that would require workers in general to be tested to determine whether they have used illegal drugs recently or would that be an unfair invasion of privacy?"* 61% of the respondents favored such a course of action.)

They were also asked: *"Do you think someone who uses cocaine occasionally should be prosecuted and punished as a criminal or not?"* 69% said yes. Based on government data, that would result in 8.2 million Americans being locked up or otherwise punished for cocaine use alone.

In a Washington Post-ABC Poll, respondents were asked "Would you be willing to give up a few of the freedoms we have in this country if it meant we could greatly reduce the amount of illegal drug use?" 62% said yes.. Sixty-seven percent thought stopping cars at random was all right, 71% favored making it a crime to show the use of illegal drugs in movies, 52% were willing to have police



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The War Against Democracy

A Sampler of Excesses

o Warrantless searches have greatly increased. Police now conduct such searches involving telephone conversations, telephone numbers dialed, bank records, automobiles, boats luggage and trash.

o Public housing units are subject to warrantless searches in the form of "housing inspections." In one such case, now being litigated by the ACLU, Chicago tenants had their homes and possessions, including Christmas presents, ransacked in a search for drugs. Following the searches, the project instituted a requirement that all residents carry ID cards. Guests need a special pass to stay past midnight, packages coming into the building are searched, and even children who forget their ID cards are denied entry.

o Alexandria, Va., mayor James Moran has ordered a number of evictions from subsidized housing, even if only one person in the household, or even a guest, is suspected of drug involvement.

o Last May, armed US Marshalls carried out evictions in over 200 DC apartments where drug use or dealing was suspected. Few drugs were actually found, and many of the tenants were in rent disputes over property repairs with their landlords, who often were the 'informants' upon whom the government's action was based.

o Lawrence, Mass., sent letters to every landlord in the city warning that their property would be confiscated if there was drug activity by their tenants.

o Over one-third of American businesses now require some form of blood or urine testing of employees. Other employers have begun private surveillance of their workers. In one case, a New Mexico newspaper publisher staged a private midnight raid on his own offices, complete with helicopter, private security forces, and drug-sniffing dogs.

o Federal government contractors must now conform to vague regulations that require a 'drug-free' workplace. Off-duty behavior is increasingly monitored.

o The federal government is increasing its random testing of federal workers as it wins test cases in the courts.

o Schools search lockers and possessions without probable cause or warrant. Fairfax, Va., has introduced metal detectors and drug-sniffing dogs. High schools are beginning to test athletes for drugs, and one Illinois school district planned to test all students participating in extracurricular activities -- including the band and the math club, but restricted the program to athletes after parental complaints.

o Washington, DC,'s city council twice passed a youth curfew law that would have effectively put the city's teenagers under house arrest from late evening until dawn. The measure was found unconstitutional. DC has, however, passed a new anti-loitering law that prohibits two or more people from stopping to talk along any 1000-foot stretch temporarily designated by police.

o The military, traditionally prohibited from engaging in domestic law enforcement, is increasingly involved with local police departments. The DC National Guard, for example, is engaged in intelligence analysis and providing a score of helicopters to patrol neighborhoods.

o Vehicles and vessels have been seized in cases in which only minute quantities of drugs have been found in them.

o Plans being seriously discussed for further invasions of individual liberties include confiscation of drivers' licenses of drug users, shooting down suspected airborne drug traffickers, and forced "civil commitment" for suspected drug users who have not even been arrested.

[Based in part on a summary by Michael Hasty in the Washington Peace Center Newsletter]

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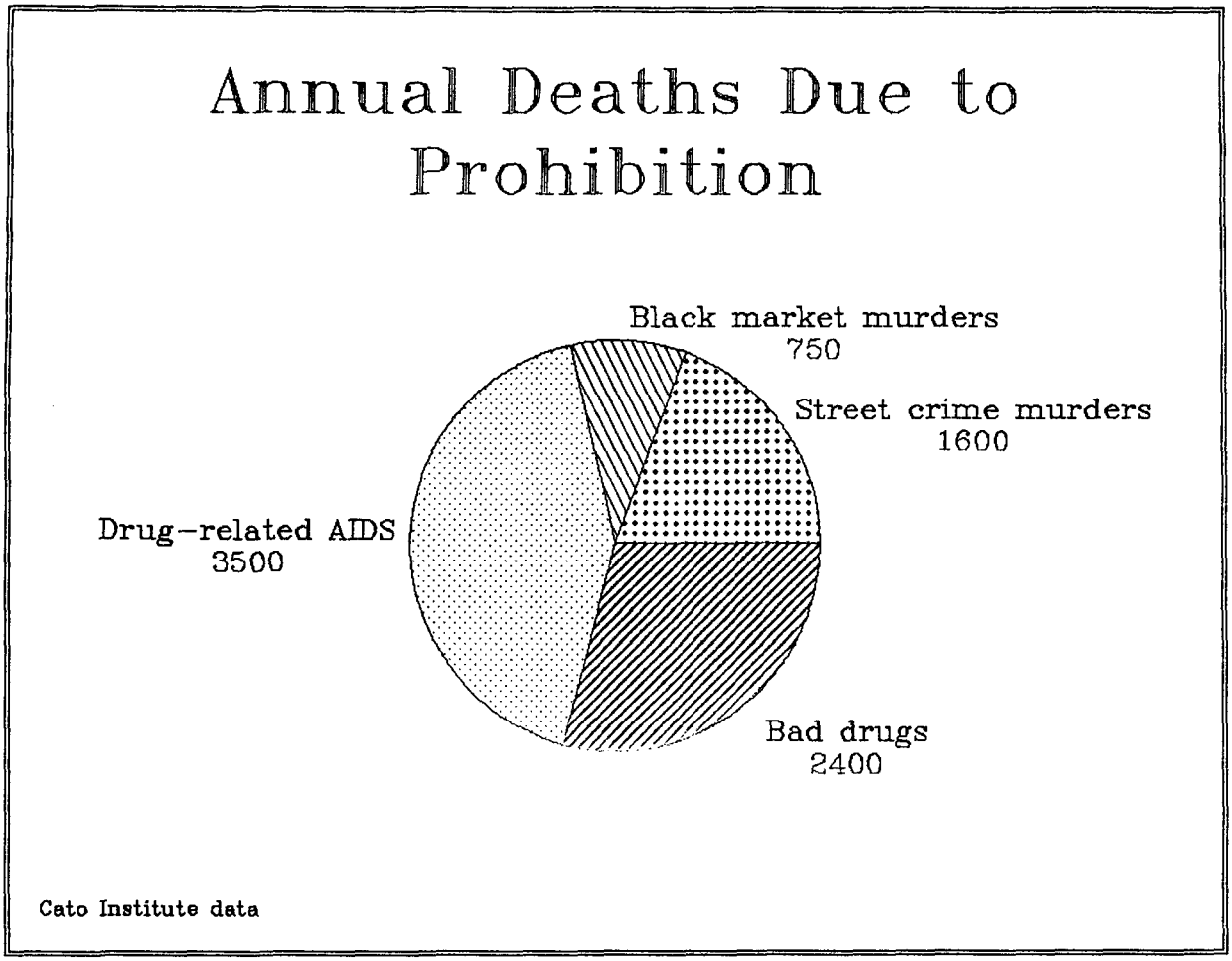

search homes of drug suspects "even if the houses of people like you are sometimes searched by mistake," 87% approved of school searches of lockers.

Part of the key to these appalling results can be found in another question in the Post-ABC poll. Asked whether the drug problem was a bigger one than five years ago, 85% said yes, despite the fact that almost all drug use has declined in this period. Clearly the drug disinformation campaign of the administration and media has worked.

Well, we can always try the Iranian model

William Bennett recently indicated that he had no moral problem with executing drug dealers. There may, however, be some practical problems, as the Iranians have found out. For the past ten years, the government has been trying to stamp out rising addiction, including repeated efforts to arrest and publicly execute drug dealers. It has been a failure. So last July, Iran rounded up 55,000 drug users and sent them to labor camps, promising another 150,000 registered addicts might follow soon. But even such draconian attempts fall short of dealing with Iran's problem. According to to country's own press there are one million unregistered addicts as well.

Or Holland?

From the Drug Policy Letter: "The Netherlands is the only country in the world to have declared the very idea of a drug war destructive. Holland has begun the process of dismantling some of the worst features of prohibition by decriminalizing possession and small sales of marijuana and hashish, by openly stating that addicts are decent member of the Dutch family, by providing treatment and social welfare support payments to addicts where needed, and by providing clean needles and legal drugs to injecting addicts upon request." The results? Amersterdam, a city roughly the size of Washington, has less than one-tenth the homicides as DC and Dutch teenagers are one-tenth as likely as their American counterparts to use pot.

The arresting solution

Mark Kleiman, former drug policy analyst for the Department of Justice, told Newsweek: "Ask a politician what to do about crime, and he'll say, 'Hire more cops.' It's totally irrelevant. What cops produce are more arrests. We've already got more arests than we can deal with."

Watching the watchman

Although the media has not made much of it, some law enforcement officials are becoming worried about the corruption that drug prohibition encourages within their departments. Retiring DC police chief Maurice Turner said it was his "biggest single worry." Turner was afraid that "police officers will become involved in cocaine crack themselves. [It] is probably will be the Achilles' heel of the police department." As a case in point, a two-year investigation into DC police graft and corruption resulted recently in the indictment of two vice squad officers for allegedly stealing funds to pay for drug buys and lying to judges to get search warrants. Twelve other police officers are being investigated. Already the affair has resulted in the

(Please turn to back page)

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A Letter to the Publisher

[Some months back, I was invited to a community meeting called by Donald Graham, publisher of the Washington Post. I was unable to attend, but I wrote Graham a letter, part of which follows--s.s.]:

Dear Don: I imagine that you could write down today a list of the major concerns that will be brought up at the meeting. These concerns haven't changed much over the years; they need not so much discovery as response. I am of two minds on this matter. On the one hand I have come to accept the wisdom that one should never try to teach a pig to sing -- it doesn't work and it annoys the pig. On the other hand, I have sensed enough wistful desire on your part and enough frustration on the part of members of your staff to cling to the hope that there remains potential of change.

Let me suggest a slightly different way of looking at the problem that might help to free that potential:

The Post controls the opening minutes of each day in the lives of over a million Washingtonians. Barely removed from our sleep, we pick up our cup of coffee to read the Post. Spousal conversation at that point in the diurnal cycle is in no small part determined by the Post. Our children soon catch the spirit. My younger son, for example, has come to believe that asking for the sports pages is an adequate substitute for saying good morning to his parents.

And what are we doing as we sit there glazing our fingers with your ink? At one level we believe we are educating ourselves. But at another, and very important level, we are developing an impression of the day and of our city that will affect our mood, our conversation and our actions for the hours to come.

And how does the Post serve us at this critical juncture? What sort of day and city does it prepare us for? Basically it says to the reader: you are about to go out in a city which has a wealth of problems that you can't solve, pleasures which you're not important enough to partake of, and people who, when they are not just being dull, are deceitful, avaricious or mean.

Some years ago I subscribed to the Philadelphia Daily News in order to select a column by Chuck Stone for reprinting. I discovered a curious thing happening to me. I began reading the paper for pleasure. It dawned on me that here was what I was missing in Washington as filtered by the Post: a real city with terrible, wonderful, funny and contentious things happening to real people. The obituarist ran long obituaries of ordinary but interesting people. The columnists fought with each other. The editorials displayed human emotion rather than the bureaucratic consensus of an editorial committee. Most of all, people in Philadelphia, one gathered from the Daily News, were meant to have fun. Further, they had rights that were not to be intruded upon by crime, bureaucratic idiocy or other forms of venality. In short, the paper, written from the reader's perspective, projected a city that was worth facing, enjoying and fighting for.

In contrast, the Post seems at times almost maniacally determined to drain the life out of the city. The ghost of Harry Gabbitt has been thoroughly exorcised and what remains is a bureaucratic memo on the last 24 hours from the perspective of that small minority of people who wield power in this town.

So if I had been able to come to your meeting I would have accused you of being a wet blanket on my mornings and, by consequence, of the rest of the day. To my mind, this is as serious a charge as one can make against a daily newspaper.

I think this is so not because Post writers and editors are inherently dull, indifferent, or lack humor or emotion. Many, I have found, consider themselves more prisoners than collaborators. I think the problem stems from the fashion in which the Post attempts to rule, benignly and with noblesse oblige, from its monopoly position. Its methods, as I understand them, are not strikingly different from those of McDonald's, that is to say they depend in no small part on quality control. This control, aimed at preventing bad things from happening, has the inevitable result of preventing a lot of good things from happening as well. You end up with a product not unlike Muzak, in which both the low and high pitches are removed leaving the listener with the bland middle range.

This may strike you as inevitable, but I would suggest a way out of the dilemma. Give up some control. If you insist on acting like gods, your task will inevitably be futile, contentious and ultimately unrewarding. The community will come periodically and dump magazines on your doorstep or plead earnestly and vainly at your dinners. And nothing will happen. You will remain read and disliked.

Imagine, however, a Post which did not take upon itself the god-like task of blending and compromising all the different views, currents and spirits of the city. A Post that decided instead to be a stage upon which the city acted out its own play. A Post in which columnists did not have to go running to Benjamin Bradlee to defend their right to say something controversial. A Post that found Style in people who earned less than six figures, or in people we could emulate rather than scorn. A Post in which politics was theatre as well as process. A Post in which what Benjamin Franklin referred to as the little felicities of every day were reported as well as the great strokes of the mighty. A Post that did not wait for the downfall of a mayor to report the other voices and other ideas in the city. A Post in which one could expect to find both the joy and danger that awaited when one left the house in the morning.

You could not describe such a Post in a memo because its direction would not come from management or editorial decisions but from the vitality of the city itself. The same million stories that were out there in *Front Page* days are still out there waiting for the Post to cover them.

It would not be orderly. But there is no objectivity in creating journalistic order out of the anarchy of a city. No fun or wisdom either.

In short, my advice would be to abdicate as priest, broker, mediator and civic Cuisinart. Just be in the news business. It's a fine trade and all too few people practice it these days.

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dropping of more than 300 drug cases in one police district alone.

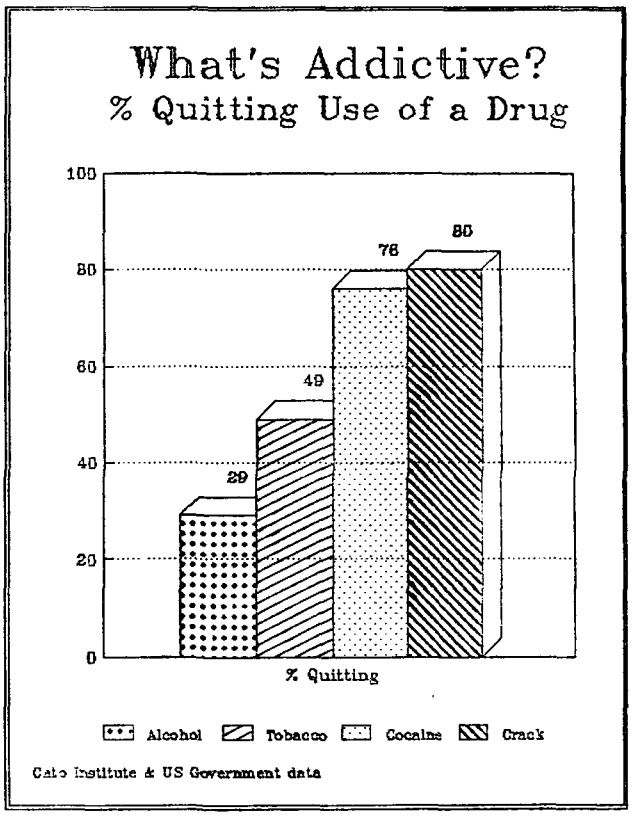
A nation of coke addicts?

Supporters of drug prohibition conjure up an image of a nation of cokeheads resulting from legalization. But James Ostrowski of the Cato Institute calculates that even William Bennett's worse fears might cut back on the death rate. Here's how: Let's assume there are ten million new cocaine users as a result of legalization. But let's also assume that just five percent of these people give up smoking cigarettes in the process of switching to cocaine. There would be a net decline of 2400 deaths in the country as a result.

Creating a criminal class

Next to destroying our individual liberties and creating needless violence, probably the worse effect of the war on drugs is going be the creation of a class of Americans who will be denied normal employment because they can't pass drug tests and, in fact, won't even be allowed in the Army. We are, in fact, creating such an underground employment class right now. A leading drug testing service reported recently that 12% of those taking pre-employment drug tests fail. Poull Brien, president of Bio-Analytical Technologies, added that "most drugs with the exception of marijuana pass out of the system in two days, so it's not hard to pass these tests. Consequently, what we're reporting is just the tip of the iceberg."

In other words, 12% of those knowing they were going to be tested for drugs failed. Further, the figures are about the same for people on the job. Extrapolated for the labor force as a whole, this suggests a minimum of 13 million Americans that our national policy is attempting to exclude from the workforce. -- *Sam Smith*



One way to measure the long-term addictiveness of a drug is to find the percentage of people who have used a particular drug and no longer do so. Here are the figures for various legal and illegal drugs.

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